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ABSTRACT

This study examines two concepts--the relationship between different types of television viewing as evidence of viewer selectivity, and the structural relationships between television viewing and experiences derived from a subculture and location in the social structure. A review of the way mainstream research has characterized the viewing behavior of the black audience provides background information for the study. Data for this study were collected by a 1984 telephone survey of 161 adult Afro-Americans living in four census tracts in Washington, D.C. selected on the basis of income level and racial composition. After information had been collected, two sets of regression analyses were done on general television viewing, daily and weekly black character viewing, perceived reality of black character programs, and experience. Television viewing variables and variables measuring subcultural experience and location in the social structure were also identified. The preliminary findings are summarized in five tables: (1) relations between television viewing variables (Pearson's partial correlations were used to test for this relationship); (2) factor loadings for the perceived reality of black character programs; (3) regression models predicting television viewing; (4) regression models predicting daily and weekly black character program viewing; and (5) regression models predicting perceived reality of black character programs factors. Five figures include a path model for general viewing; a path model for black character viewing; a path model for perceived reality of black character programs; path models for all black and integrated settings; and path models for macho fantasy and urban realism settings. (27 references) (CGD)

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SUBCULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND TELEVISION VIEWING

Paper presented to the International Television Studies Conference 1986, London, England, July 10-12, 1986.

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Newcomb and Hirsch (19) describe television as a "cultural forum" reflecting various themes in society. These themes are subjected to selective readings or interpretations by viewers. Instead of accepting the normative paradigm of a straight sender-message-receiver model of communication, many researchers now argue that culture is an intervening variable through which media content is filtered and interpreted (4, 8, 9, 18, 26, et al.). Failure to identify the activity and sociocultural conditions of the receiver represents a crisis in the dominant audience paradigm resulting in the appearance of "anomalous" sections of the audience. This is particularly true of how mainstream research has characterized the viewing behavior of the black audience (7, 26). The overall purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between viewing and subculture. Specifically, the study will examine the relationship between different types of viewing as evidence of viewer selectivity, and the structural relationships between television viewing and experience derived from subculture and location in the social structure.

Much has been written about the nonselectivity of television viewing especially among heavy viewers. Noll (21) argues for the passive viewer-model where viewers watch the medium of television rather than specific programs. Here, the true choice is between viewing and not viewing. Gerbner (12) also assumes that audiences are relatively nonselective. He contends that this behavior is encouraged by the homogeneous nature of content across all genre with respect to violence, social relationships, value and outcomes.

Steiner (24), however, argues the first-choice-only model where the potential audience is divided into subgroups with internally homogeneous program preferences. These potential programs can be classified in terms of program types. Similarly, Jeffries (14) separates the decision to view television from program selection. The former is media seeking behavior, the

latter is content seeking behavior. Philport (22) suggests the need to distinguish viewers' predisposition to select a program based on its format or own unique characteristics. Research by Allen (1, 2, 3) strongly supports this position that television viewing by the black audience is a selective process dependent upon racial experience and race-related psychosocial factors or predispositions. This is inspite of the disportionate percentage of black viewers who are heavy television viewers and hence presumed to be even more nonselective (20, 25).

White (26) states that researchers should focus on the situational conditions that determine when a receiver will "select" information from a source. "Selection" implies the receiver perceives the information as relevant. If this view is correct, then black viewership of television content is problematic given the presence of racial and racist stereotypes and the low representation of black images overall in that medium (6, 11, 15, 27). At this juncture, we may seriously question the idea of selectivity from such a limited range of images. If there is selectivity, what is the basis for it?

This leads us to look at the concept of television viewing. Salomen and Cohen (23) describe television as a construct tapping several dimensions of choice behavior. They define television viewing on at least three levels including viewing irrespective of content, viewing specific content, and involvement with specific content. Perceived reality of television content increases one's involvement with content and its relevance to the viewer. Hawkins (13) observed "to the extent that we perceive television's content to be a realistic portrayal of life, we may be more affected by and learn more from that content." Comstock et al. (7) conclude that perceived reality is a necessary condition for any relationship of influence between viewing and behavior to occur irrespective of degree of exposure or consequential values

associated with the program. Thus we may conclude that to the extent black viewers evaluate content differently with respect to its true-to-lifeness, one may observe viewer selectivity. It is reasonable to expect social experience to be an important factor in determining viewer perceptions of content realism.

Earlier we noted the intensive stereotyping that is characteristic of black character programs on television. Nevertheless, content analyses suggests there are still differences among programs which may offer viewers a basis of selection. Black characters tend to be cast either in an all-black setting or as the lone black person in an otherwise all-white setting (6). The all-black settings are usually portrayed in a low-income environment with few socially productive persons and/or themes (5). The stereotyping of black characters in an all-black setting is intensified through the use of black English. Black English is more often used by low income comic characters (11). Black characters are cast predominately in situation-comedies with storylines that avoid discussions about race or racism and poverty.

To complete the model for this study we look at subculture and social structure as the main sources of experiences. Subculture is a particularized configuration of historically evolved selected processes through which individuals channel their reactions to internal and external stimuli (10). It provides the individual with the social and cultural frameworks through which they experience life and obtain their important symbolic and real world environment (18). Key subcultural experiences for Afro-Americans are derived from race of neighborhood, tenure of neighborhood residency, age, church-going, frequency of church attendance, race of church denomination attended, and community participation. Important social structural factors include sex, income, education, home ownership, occupational status, subjective social class (16).

This study was guided by the following research questions.

R_1: Is there a relationship between different types of viewing and what are the implications for viewer selectivity?

R_2: What are the structural linkages between television viewing and experience derived from subculture and social location?

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected by a telephone survey of 161 adult Afro-Americans between October 1, 1984 - November 7, 1984 in Washington, D.C. Interviews were conducted in four census tracts selected on the basis of income level and racial composition. This represents a limitation on the generalizability of the study to an initial investigation of relationships.

The sample was selected from two predominately black neighborhoods (over 90% black), one racially mixed neighborhood (50% black), and one predominately white neighborhood (20% black). The first available adult per household was interviewed. Telephone numbers were obtained from a reverse telephone directory and randomly assigned a calling order. A relatively low response rate of 22% was obtained due to a large number of not-at-home responses and lines changed. Follow up calls for lines changed were not made. Pearson's partial correlations were used to test for a relationship between the three different viewing variables.

Factor analysis using varimax rotation was used to explore the possibility of interrelations among programs rated by viewers for perceived reality. Four program factors were observed based on factor loadings of individual programs. Averaged composite index scores for each factor were constructed using the raw scores of respondents on each program. In addition, one overall composite index score was similarly constructed based on raw scores on all the program items rated for perceived reality. We were interested in observing differences in structural linkages between different types of experiences and program

factors based on the step-wise hierarchial regression analyses.

In the first set of regression analyses, general television viewing, black character program viewing (composite), daily black character viewing, weekly black character viewing and the overall composite of perceived reality of black character programs (alpha = .81) were each regressed against the experience variables in a step-wise manner. In the second set of analyses, the four perceived reality program factors were each regressed first on weekly black character viewing, daily black character viewing and general viewing, then regressed on the experience variables. The four factors consisted of:

a) all-black setting (The Jeffersons,[1] What's Happ'ning, Good Times and Sanford and Son) (alpha = .77);

b) integrated setting (Webster, Gimme a Break, Dif'rent Strokes, and Benson) (alpha = .73);

c) urban realism setting (Hill Street Blues); and

d) macho fantasy setting (The A-Team).

The model for this study included television viewing variables and variables measuring subcultural experience and location in the social structure. Television viewing was measured using three separate self-report variables. 1) Viewer's estimate of "on yesterday how many hours" he/she spent watching television. 2) Viewer's estimate of the number of episodes of eight weekly black character programs she/he watched in the past four weeks and the number of episodes of four daily black character programs he/she viewed in the past week. This score was summed with one point given for each episode of any program viewed. 3) Viewer's perceived reality of the black character programs

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[1] The Jeffersons fits into the all-black viewing scenario although the Jefferson family lives in a predominately white neighborhood. The story takes place primarily within the all-black environment of the Jefferson household where white characters are only occasionally featured.

listed above. Respondents were asked to evaluate these programs for their perceived true-to-lifeness using a ten point interval measure scale. Higher scores indicated a higher level of perceived reality. Scores were averaged.

Respondents participation in the black subculture was measured by race of neighborhood (coded from census data), tenure of neighborhood residency, church going, frequency of church attendance, race of church denomination, community participation and age.[1]

Respondents location in the social structure was measured by sex, education, income, subjective social class, home ownership, and occupational status.

FINDINGS

The correlational analysis suggests the respondents in this study were engaged in different types of television viewing in a manner consistent with our theoretical notions concerning viewer selectivity. In Table 1, there is a moderate relationship between general viewing and black character program viewing ($r = .29$, $p < .001$), and a stronger relationship between black character program viewing and perceived reality of black character programs ($r = .34$, $p < .001$). There is no relationship between perceived reality and general viewing. Partial control for perceived reality has no effect on the bivariate relationship between general viewing and black character viewing. Similarly, partial control for general viewing has no effect on the bivariate relationship between perceived reality and black character viewing.

The factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed four perceived reality

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[1] Community participation was measured using a revised version of Miller's Scorecard for Community Services Activity (17) (alpha = .75). Churches coded as black denomination were: Baptist, A.M.E., Holiness, Pentacostal, Apostolic, Church of God, Church of Christ, and Evangelical Christian. Generation was coded as old (born before 1927), middle-aged (born between 1928-1946), and young (born between 1947-1966).

program factors named as follows: all-black setting, integrated setting, urban realism setting, and macho fantasy setting (see Table 2). None of the program variables loaded heavily on more than one factor thereby suggesting orthogonality.

In the first set of regression analyses, structural linkages between the experience variables and general viewing, black character viewing and perceived reality were tested. The experience variables explained 15% ($p < .01$) of the variance in general viewing, 36% ($p < .01$) of black character viewing and 26% ($p < .01$) of perceived reality (see Table 3). Black character viewing was disaggregated into daily and weekly viewing. The experience variables explained 34% ($p < .01$) of daily black character viewing and 33% ($p < .01$) of weekly black character viewing (see Table 4).

Figure 1 illustrates a path analytic model of the experience variables providing the most parsimonious explanation of general viewing. Education and black church attendance make the largest contributions to explained variance and are the only two significant variables. Both are related to general viewing inversely as is community participation. Notably, church going makes a positive contribution to general viewing although black church attendance is negative. For this sample, a heavy general television viewer is a black female of low education, and low community participation except for her attendance of a nonblack church. She is also a long term resident of her neighborhood.

Black character program viewing is presented in Figure 2. While education, community participation and tenure of neighborhood residency overlap from the general viewing path model, the sign for community participation is inversed and education makes a larger contribution to explained variance. Further, we observe three new experience variables in this model that were not in the general viewing model - subjective social class, home ownership and income.

The heavy black character program viewer is a long term resident of his neighborhood and has a low education and low income. He or she is not a home owner but still identifies as middle class or above. This viewer is also active in the community.

The path model for perceived reality of black character programs is illustrated in Figure 3. Education and home ownership make the largest contributions to explained variance and both are inversely related to viewing. Generation and frequency of church attendance are significant explainers of perceived reality and are not included in the models for the other two types of viewing. Community participation and income make negative contributions to perceived reality.

When black character program viewing is analyzed as daily and weekly viewing there was a differentiation among the variables explaining the two types of viewing (see Table 4). While education is inversely linked to both types of viewing, it is far more important in predicting daily viewing. Meanwhile, home ownership is related similarly to both variables. There are no other variables that predict both types of viewing. Daily black character viewing is explained by three experience variables including education, home ownership and tenure of neighborhood residency (which is not significant in the equation).

Weekly black character viewing is a more complex variable. In addition to education and home ownership, it was also explained by age, frequency of church attendance and income (which was not a significant predictor). For both daily and weekly black character viewing, subcultural variables increased the likelihood of viewing, while increases in location in the social structure predicted decreases in viewing.

From Table 5 we observe that the experience variables differentiated

according to different program factors under perceived reality of black character programs. The experience variables and television exposure variables (general viewing, weekly black character viewing, and daily black character viewing) explained 22% of variance in all black setting, 23% of integrated setting, 19% of urban realism and 25% of macho fantasy. The path models for these four factors are presented in Figures 4 and 5.

The viewer with a high perceived reality of the all black setting programs tends to be an older person who views daily black character programs heavily. These individuals are of low occupational status and attend a black church.

High perceived reality of the integrated setting programs was most characteristic of persons with a low education and low occupational status but active in the community. These individuals view weekly black character programs heavily but are not heavy general viewers of television suggesting selectivity.

For urban realism, young males with a high income saw this factor as more realistic. They tend to live in black neighborhoods and view general television heavily.

High perceived reality of the macho fantasy factor was characteristic of heavy viewers of daily black character programs. These viewers had a low education, were active in the community and were short term residents of a black neighborhood.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An often heard criticism of television studies is the inadequate operationalization of the viewing measure. In Table 1, the intercorrelations of our three viewing measures suggests each may be tapping a different construct which may be termed viewing. The moderate size of the relationship between general viewing and black character viewing ($r = .29$) implies that only part of general

viewing consists of black character viewing. One form of viewing does not strongly imply the other. Further, while black character viewing and perceived reality of black character programs are also moderately related ($r = .34$), perceived reality of black character programs and general viewing are not related. Hence, belief in one type of content does not translate into an overall acceptance of television content as realistic.

For our sample, these findings may suggest that black viewers distinguish between black character and nonblack character programs. They may perceive at least two worlds on television - one black, the other white. Perceptions or evaluations of one world do not carry over into the other necessarily. In short, our viewers may be selective. An examination of the experiences that best predict or explain variance in each type of viewing supports this notion of selectivity. Education and community participation were common predictors for general viewing, black character viewing and perceived reality of black character program. However, each viewing model also included experience predictors exclusive to that model alone.

General television viewing was best explained by education, black church attendance, church going, community participation and sex. Being female and attending church increased the likelihood of one being a heavy general viewer. In most studies activities outside the home decrease television viewing. But in this study, we observe two measures of the same type activity having opposite influences on viewing. That is, black church attendance decreases the likelihood of one viewing general television. Clearly content of activity influences content of television sought. Perhaps there is no one overall relationship between experience and viewing, but the relationship is specific to type of content viewed. This belief is supported by changes in the type of contribution (negative or positive) that community participation makes to different types of

viewing. Community participation is inversely related to general viewing. That is overall or total amount of time spent viewing is decreased as one is more active in the community. But this relationship does not hold up for all types of viewing as we will observe below.

Black character viewing (composite) was best explained by education, home ownership, generation, frequency of church attendance, community participation and income. Only generation and frequency of church attendance make a positive contribution to black character viewing. Again we observe that two activities that occur outside the home, in this case, frequency of church attendance and community participation, have opposite correlational signs with viewing. Both activities consume time, but imply different behavior toward race specific content. We observe another difference in the type of experiences predicting general viewing versus black character viewing. For general viewing, the only social structural variable explaining variance was education (sex is not a social structure variable per se). Subcultural factors were the main type of variables in that equation. On the other hand, for black character viewing, social structure becomes more significant in the equation along with subculture. Three social structural variables predict black character viewing. This differentiation of types of experiences in each viewing model suggests that type of subcultural experience is the most significant factor (aside from education) to determine if one will view black or nonblack character content. Within the black character category, location in the social structure becomes more significant in differentiating viewers, however, subcultural experience is still significant.

The experiences predicting daily and weekly black character program viewing vary. Subcultural experience is more important in explaining weekly viewing than it is for daily viewing. Participation in the black subculture increases

viewing but higher social structural location decreases viewing. When black character viewing is examined as daily and weekly viewing the different experience variables explaining variance suggest the two types of viewing are indeed different.

Perceived reality of black character programs was best explained by education, subjective social class, income, home ownership, community participation and tenure of neighborhood residency. In this model, social structure location clearly dominates over subcultural experience in differentiating viewers. Education is the only significant predictor in the equation, hence, suggesting that the ability to decode television's messages is the most important factor. However, the presence of so many social structural variables measuring social class objectively and subjectively strongly suggests that internal factors of these black character programs are very important to viewers and that all viewing is not equal. Persons who identify as middle class or above and are low-income nonhome owners but active in their community are most likely to believe in the realism of black character programs. What is of much interest, is that for the first time community participation is positively related to a viewing variable. This emphasizes what has been speculated earlier about selectivity in viewing and content of social experience. Community participation may reduce time for exposure to television but it increases one's belief in the realism of black character programs.

The perceived reality variable is probably our most complex and important viewing variable illustrating how television viewing interacts with experience. We observed earlier that black characters on television tend to be dichotomized into racial settings characterized by opposite socio-economic statuses. The factor analysis of perceived reality confirms our belief that black viewers select black character programs along these same dimensions.

Four perceived reality program factors were observed based on the factor

analysis. The two largest factors represented a clear racial dichotomization between the all black setting and the integrated setting. Each of these two factors consisted of four programs each (see Table 2). The path analysis for each factor suggests that type of subcultural experience differentiates the viewers of each factor.

Viewers from both factors tend to be of low social status. Older people tend to find the all black setting more realistic. But quite significantly, black church goers report the all black setting more realistic while those with a high level of community activity find the integrated settings more realistic. Both of these measures were used to measure subcultural activity. Originally we expected much of religious activity to be included under community participation, but there is no significant bivariate relationship between the two measures. They are obviously measuring two different types of activity that predict preference for two varying types of television content.

A correlational analysis of the relationships among the experience variables used in this study suggests that persons with a high level of community activity tend to be of higher social status and live in a black neighborhood. They are social status minorities within their own communities. The socio-economic indicators overall were inversely correlated with black neighborhood residence. On the other hand, black church goers tend to be older persons of low social status. The quality of racial experience along with socio-economic status appears to influence perceived reality of television content along racial dimensions.

The urban realism factor (Hill Street Blues) was reported as more realistic by young males living in a black neighborhood and with higher income levels. They prefer general television viewing. This was the only perceived reality factor where a black character viewing variable was not a significant predictor

of viewing. For this factor, though income differences are important, education is not in the equation. We speculate that these males may be skilled workers with a high school education thus explaining their higher income levels. This may also explain their preference for an urban occupation-based drama over home-based situation-comedies in the all black and integrated setting factors. Further, this factor also featured an integrated setting suggesting high income blacks reject the all black setting as realistic.

The macho fantasy factor (The A Team) was perceived as more realistic by black neighborhood residents with a low education but who are active in the community. This factor also featured an integrated setting but the lead character, Mr. T, has been severely criticized as perpetuating a stereotypical image due to his near ludicrous strongman costume and MoHawk Indian haircut. Thus the low status community activist sees this integrated setting as realistic but his/her low education limits his ability to decode the message of racism.

These findings are preliminary and come from an exploratory study but they suggest new and highly significant insights into television viewing and social experience. The model presented here must be tested on a more representative level and include a multi-racial sample. The general viewing variable should be expanded to identify specific programs viewed and their perceived realism. Community participation should be specified by type of activity in order to understand the type of activities and ideology underlying this variable. Not withstanding the general limitations on this study and the need for caution in making conclusions, we feel that television viewing is a selective process influenced by social experience derived from subculture and location in the social structure.

PERCEIVED REALITY OF BLACK CHARACTER PROGRAMS

FACTOR LOADINGS

Factor 1: All Black Setting	Loadings
The Jeffersons	.58
Sanford and Son	.57
What's Happ'ning	.59
Good Times	.76
Factor 2: Integrated Setting	
Gimme a Break	.50
Dif'rent Strokes	.59
Benson	.70
Webster	.54
Factor 3: Urban Realism	
Hill Street Blues	.62
Factor 4: Macho Fantasy	
The A-Team	.92

TABLE 2

REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING TELEVISION VIEWING

	Criterion variables		
Conditional variables	GTV	BCV	BCE
Education	-.27a	-.29b	-.36b
Community participation	-.15	-.13	.16
Home ownership		-.29b	-.21a
Subj. social class			.17
Black church	-.23a		
Church going	.17		
Freq. church		.21a	
Generation		.25a	
Income		-.11	-.17
Occupational status			
Sex	.11		
Black neighborhood			
Tenure residency			.15
R-squared	.15	.36	.26
s.e.	1.9	9.4	1.6
F	3.4b	9.0b	5.6b

a - $p < .05$
b - $p < .01$

TABLE 3

REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING DAILY AND WEEKLY BLACK CHARACTER PROGRAM VIEWING

	Criterion variables Black character program viewing	
Conditional variables	weekly	daily
Education	-.24a	-.53b
Freq. church	.27b	
Age	.30b	
Home ownership	-.24a	-.26a
Income	-.15	
Residence tenure		.18
R-squared	33%	34%
s.e.	5.97	4.86
F	9.47b	15.7b

a - $p < .05$
b - $p < .01$

TABLE 4

REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING PERCEIVED REALITY OF BLACK CHARACTER PROGRAMS FACTORS

	Criterion variables			
Conditional Variables	All Black	Integrated	Urban Realism	Macho Fantasy
Daily BC viewing	.23a			
Weekly BC viewing		.31b		.36b
General viewing		-.17	.19	
Age	.28b		-.35b	
Occupation	-.23a	-.21a		
Black church	.18			
Education		-.25a		-.23
Community part.		.13		.16
Sex (female)			-.27b	
Income			.17	
Black neighborhood			.15	.14
Residence tenure				-.24a
R-squared	22%	23%	19%	25%
s.e.	2.02	1.91	3.0	2.29
F	7.12b	6.08b	5.0b	6.66b

a - $p < .05$
b - $p < .01$

TABLE 5

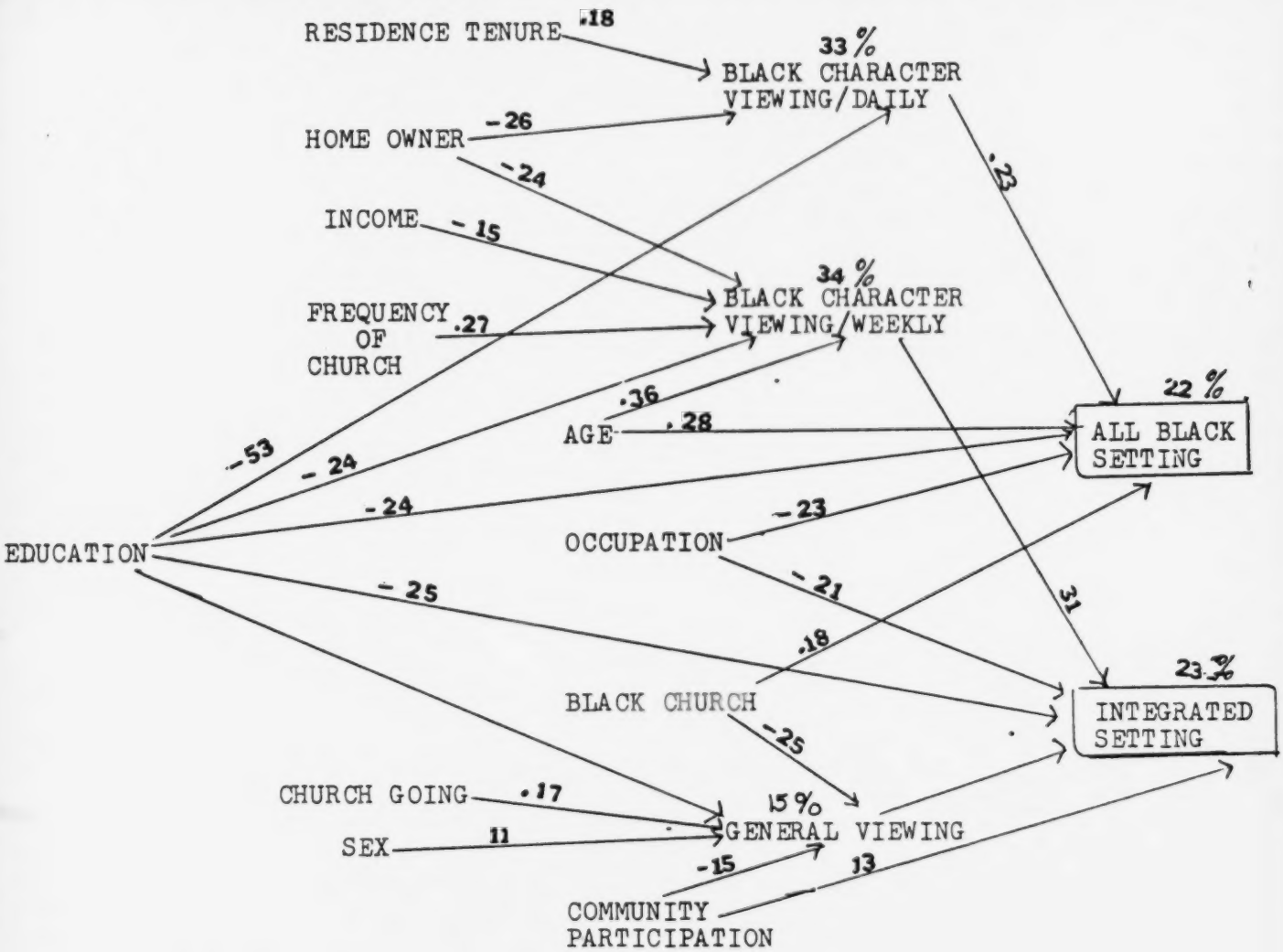

FIGURE 4. Path Models for ALL BLACK and INTEGRATED SETTINGS

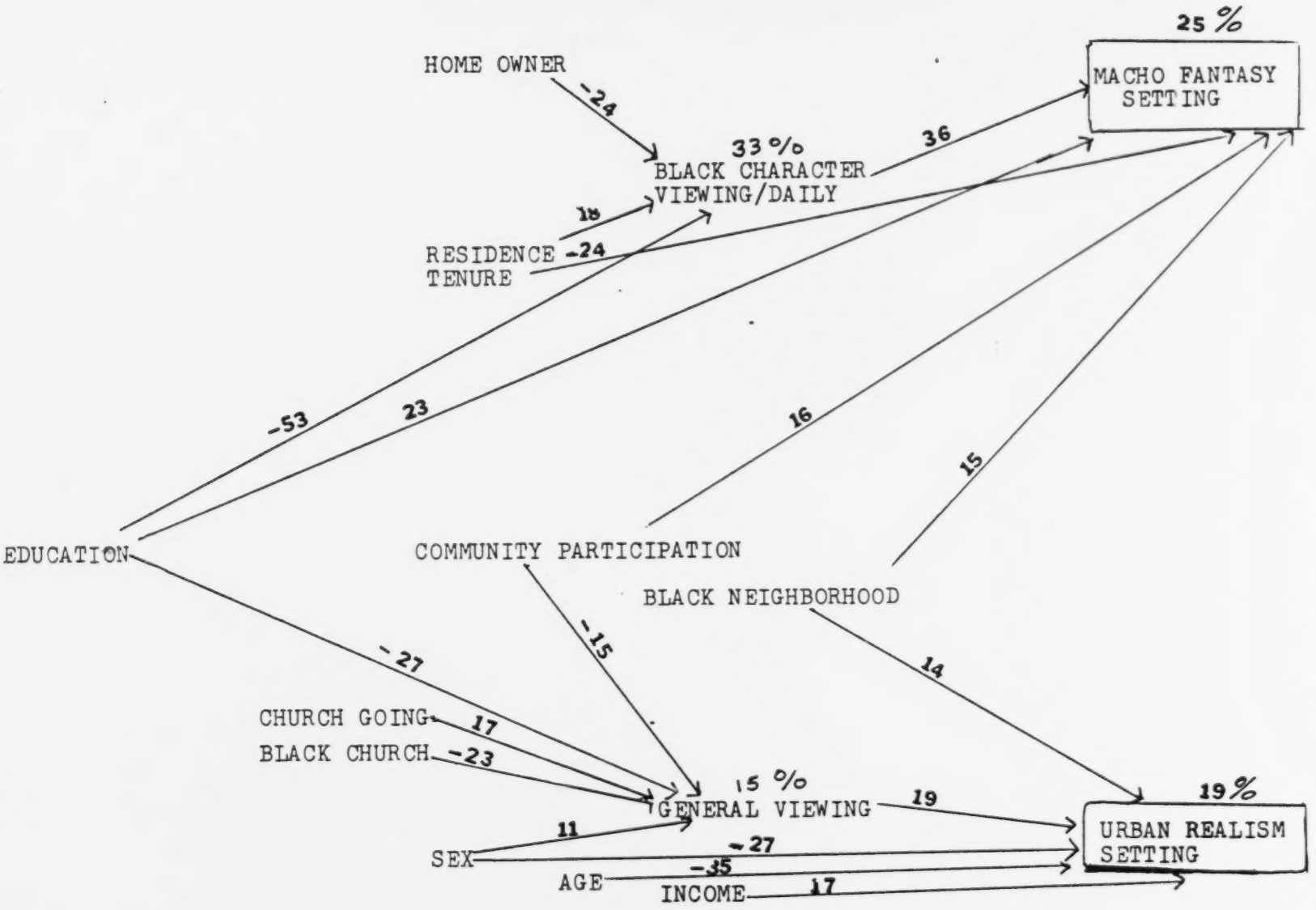

FIGURE 5. Path Models for MACHO FANTASY and URBAN REALISM SETTINGS

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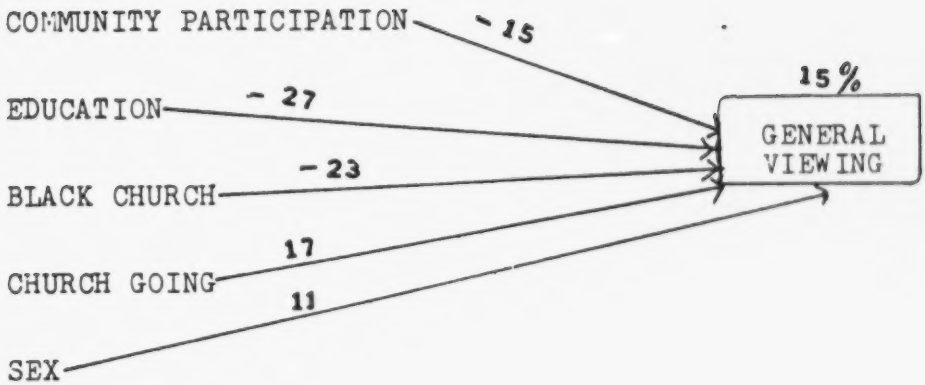

FIGURE 1. Path Model for GENERAL VIEWING

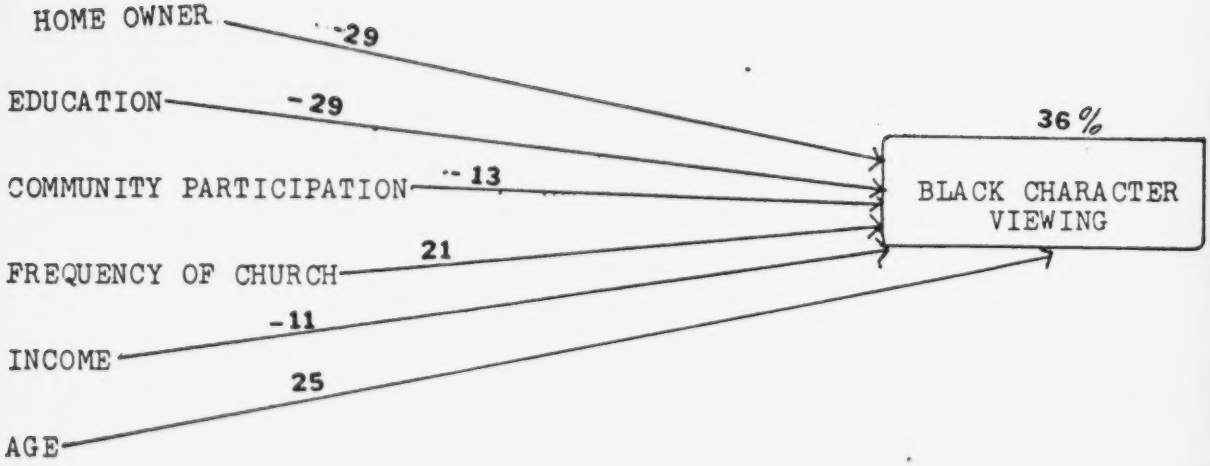

FIGURE 2. Path Model for BLACK CHARACTER VIEWING

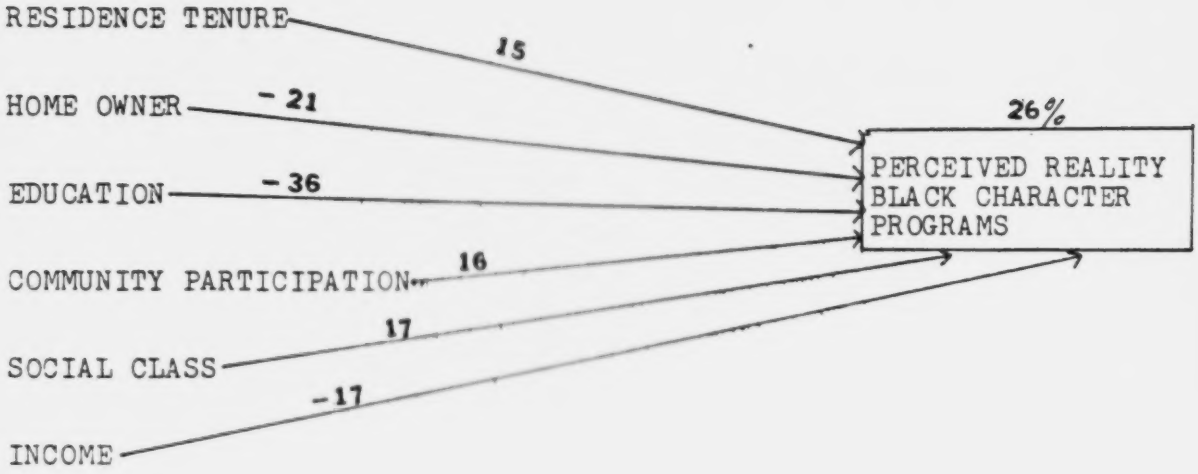

FIGURE 3. Path Model for PERCEIVED REALITY OF BLACK CHARACTER PROGRAMS

RELATIONS BETWEEN TELEVISION VIEWING VARIABLES
(PEARSON'S)

	BCV	BCE
Black Character Program Viewing (BCV)		
Perceived Reality of Black Character Programs (BCE)	.34c	
General TV Viewing (GTV)	.29c	.07

a - $p < .05$
b - $p < .01$
c - $p < .001$

TABLE 1

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